

The Johnson County Community

By far the largest Iowa Amish and Mennonite community in 1959 was the one in Johnson County, and in the adjoining counties of Iowa and Washington. It had its beginnings in 1845 when Daniel P. Guengerich of Fairfield County, Ohio, and his half-brother, Joseph J. Swartzendruber, of Allegany County, Maryland, selected claims along Deer Creek in what was later to be Washington Township in Johnson County. As steamboats had been coming up the Iowa River occasionally since 1841, the Amish settlers believed that Iowa City, then the capital of the Territory of Iowa, would offer exceptional trading privileges. They selected southwestern Johnson County because of its good soil, its ample supply of timber, and its rolling well-drained land.

In the following spring Guengerich and his family, William Wertz and family, and Swartzendruber settled near where Joetown, or Amish, is now located. Immediately they procured basswood in the nearby timber and made the necessary household furniture and then did their spring planting. Having done these necessary tasks, the men walked to Dubuque where they officially entered their land claims.

When the settlers contracted the ague that first summer, Swartzendruber became discouraged and moved back to Maryland, where he was married. He returned to Iowa, with his family, in 1856. The Guengerich and Wertz family were often discouraged in their early years in Iowa but they were so impoverished that they could not have left Iowa had they desired to do so. One year Guengerich lost the team of horses he had brought with him from the east and had to trade his pocket knife to have his corn cultivated. Later he obtained an ox team which he used for many years, even driving them to church.

The third family, the Peter Millers of Knox County, Ohio, joined the settlement in the fall of 1846. The community was still too small to have a church organization and it was not until the fall of 1849 that the first Sunday service was held for them. At that time Joseph Goldsmith and Christian Schwarzentruer from Lee County conducted services in Guengerich's fourteen by sixteen foot log house.

By the spring of 1851 there were more than a dozen Amish families in the community and so Joseph Goldsmith organized a church for them. Their first communion service was held a year later, with Goldsmith in charge. At that time Frederick Swartzendruber was ordained to the office of deacon, the first Amish ordination in the community. A year later his father Jacob Swartz-

endruber was ordained bishop or elder of the Johnson County church.

With the coming of the Daniel Schoettler (Shetler) family from Fairfield County, Ohio, in the spring of 1850, the stream of steady migration began which in time made the Johnson County Amish settlement the largest west of the Mississippi. The Benedict Miller and John Kempf families arrived in the autumn of 1850. Eleven families arrived during the next year. They were Preacher Jacob Swartzendruber and wife and his son Frederick and family, from Maryland; Preacher John Gingerich and family, his two sons Daniel J. and Christian J. with their families, and his son-in-law, Henry Stutzman, and wife, all from Fairfield County, Ohio; Preacher Peter Brenneman and family, Isaac Eash and family, John Roth (Rhodes) and family, John Schlabaugh and wife, and Jacob P. Guengerich and wife, all from Holmes County, Ohio. The first six families arrived in May and the last five in September.

As Amish church services are held in homes instead of meetinghouses, the size of a congregation is determined by the measurements of an average house. Before 1863 the church had grown too large to meet in one dwelling house and so the membership was divided into two groups, those living in Washington Township and in Iowa County belonging to the Deer Creek church and those in Sharon Township and northern Wash-

ington County belonging to the Sharon church. By 1877 the churches were again divided, this time into Upper Deer Creek and Lower Deer Creek and North Sharon and South Sharon.

When the Deer Creek churches again faced the problem of dividing in 1890, they decided to construct churches, a practice contrary to Amish custom. This innovation made unnecessary further subdivisions, but the Sharon churches have continued the practice of dividing geographically into units small enough to make possible home worship services. In 1959 there were the following Old Order Amish congregations in the Kalona neighborhood: Northwest District, Northeast District, Southwest District, Middle District West, Middle District East, and Southeast District. The membership of the districts ranged from 57 to 83, with a total of 447 in the six districts.

Although it was understood that the building of churches by the Deer Creek group would not affect fellowship between them and the Sharon districts, such did not prove to be the case and gradually the two groups drifted apart with the Sharon churches remaining strictly Old Order Amish Mennonites and the Deer Creek group gradually dropping the "Old Order" from their name. In time differences in church regulations and restrictions brought the Deer Creek churches into separate camps, with the Upper Deer Creek Church remaining conservative and becoming a member of

the Conservative Amish Mennonite Conference in 1915.

The Lower Deer Creek church broke completely with the Old Order in 1912 over the issue of the introduction of modern conveniences, particularly the telephone, which the Amish code of simplicity of life has not permitted. From that year until 1917 when it was admitted into the Western District Amish Mennonite Conference, Lower Deer Creek followed an independent and a more progressive course than its sister church, Upper Deer Creek. In 1921 it became a member of the Iowa-Nebraska Mennonite Conference.

In recent years the Upper Deer Creek church has been receiving a considerable number of members from the Old Order Amish community to the east in Sharon Township. As the center of population of the church membership shifted eastward, a new church, named Fairview, was constructed six miles northeast of Kalona in 1936. More recently, in 1957, a third church, Sunnyside, was built east of Kalona. The membership of the three churches in 1959 was 505.

As early as the seventies certain families were becoming dissatisfied with the strict discipline enforced by the Old Order Amish leaders and began holding separate meetings north of Kalona. Some of these families transferred their membership to the more liberal Sugar Creek church in Henry County. At this time, in 1878, one of their group,

Noah Troyer, began preaching in his sleep, or in an unconscious condition. Large audiences came to hear him and the *Iowa City Republican* reported the phenomenon and printed a book of his sermons.

This preaching by an unordained man was frowned upon by the Old Order leaders and helped accelerate the growing division between the two groups. When preacher Christian Warey moved into the community in 1884 he became the leader of the dissatisfied group and was ordained their bishop in 1885. At first this new congregation was known as the Union Amish Mennonite Church because its members came from the various Amish congregations in the settlement. To accommodate the members living in Iowa County, a separation congregation was formed in 1897. Henceforth there was the East Union church and the West Union church. These were members of the Western District Amish Mennonite Conference but the word "Amish" was dropped with the merger of the progressive Amish and the Mennonites into a united conference in 1921.

The Union churches have established other congregations in the community. In 1958 members of the East Union Mennonite Church founded the Kalona Mennonite Church. The Wellman Mennonite Church, organized in 1935, and the Daytonville Mennonite Church (1951) are partly the outgrowth of West Union Church activity. As a result of West Union missionary activity the Par-

nell Mennonite Church, started in 1948, became a full-fledged, organized congregation in 1958. The total membership of these six churches, with their origins in the Union church of 1884, is now 1,324.

Other Mennonite churches in the area owe their origins to the united efforts of a number of the above congregations. Such a one is the Iowa City Mennonite Church, established in 1927, which in 1959 had 89 members. Established through the mission efforts of the community were the Iowa Valley Mennonite Church (1949) near Lone Tree, which in 1959 had 33 members, and the Pleasant Valley Mennonite Church near Hills, dating from 1948, but organized as a separate congregation in 1956. It had 15 members in 1959.

A near neighbor to the larger Mennonite community of the area is the Liberty Mennonite Church, about four miles southeast of South English, in Keokuk County. Perhaps as early as the 1860's, Mennonite families by the name of Rhodes, Hildebrand, Wenger, Herr, and Grove, from Virginia and Pennsylvania, had migrated to Keokuk County but as there was no Mennonite church in the community, they united with other churches.

When S. B. Wenger came to the community in 1879 he found among them some interest in establishing a Mennonite church and decided to promote a congregation. Moving to Iowa in 1881 and living there to the end of his life with the exception

of the years 1892-95, when he resided in Cass County, Missouri, he did not see the realization of his dream until December 7, 1898, when the nine members in the community formed the Liberty church. Earlier Mennonite traveling evangelists at the invitation of Wenger had visited the community occasionally and had baptized members. As the community was Mennonite, and not Amish, the congregation upon organization at once became a member of the Missouri Mennonite Conference, which later became the Missouri-Iowa Mennonite Conference.

In the early years there was a limited amount of fellowship between them and the Amish of Iowa and Johnson counties, but with the merger of the more progressive Amish churches with the Mennonite churches of the trans-Mississippi area in 1921, the West Union, East Union, Lower Deer Creek, and Liberty churches were members of the same conference and fellowship increased. With the larger Mennonite settlement in recent years reaching west of Wellman, the community has almost reached the South English Mennonite settlement. In 1959 the Liberty church had 67 members. Its impact upon the larger Mennonite brotherhood had come largely through the influence of S. B. Wenger, who although only a layman, had for many years written stimulating articles for the church periodicals.

Associated in the minds of many Iowans are the

Old Order Amish communities of Johnson and Buchanan counties. In 1914-15 nine Johnson County Old Order Amish families moved approximately seventy-five miles northward to Buchanan County where, in the vicinity of Hazelton, they established a community, which by 1959 had grown into two Hazelton, one Oelwein, and two Fairbanks districts, with a combined membership of 347. Most of the members live in Buchanan County but the settlement has spilled over into Blackhawk and other nearby counties. The reasons for the new settlement lay in dissatisfaction with the Johnson County Amish churches and the desire for cheaper lands.

Later, families from Kansas, Wisconsin, and Indiana joined the settlement. Their churches are more conservative in dress and in a number of other practices than are those of Johnson County. After a period of strained relations between the two groups, peace and fellowship were restored. Earlier, similar attempts on the part of Johnson County Amish to establish new colonies in northwestern Iowa, Missouri, Arkansas, and Louisiana, had ended in failure, but the Buchanan settlement has evidently withstood the test of time and is solidly planted.

Only a few institutions have been established by those in the Johnson County Amish-Mennonite community. One of these was the German School Association of the Old Order of Amish Menno-

nites, founded in 1890. The object of the Association was "to teach and promulgate the German language and the religious principles and discipline of the Amish Church." As long as church services were conducted in the German language, their youth had to be taught to read and understand German. Formerly this had been done in the home and in the Sunday school but with the strengthening of the public schools program, the Amish leaders felt that a more concerted effort must be made to retain the German which was the language of their religious literature.

In 1890 a school was built for this purpose near Deer Creek on the road between the Upper and Lower Deer Creek churches. At first winter terms for older young people were held but eventually the program shifted to a summer term for children and early adolescents. For a number of years each of the Deer Creek churches had its own building but the program came to an end in 1914 in spite of the valiant efforts of S. D. Guengerich, its principal promoter, to defend the institution. The writer can well remember attending "Dutch College," as it was popularly called, during summer "vacations" and of learning to read and write German before he reached his teens. The Old Order in Sharon Township still carries on a German school program although it has not been as well publicized as were the schools in the Deer Creek districts.

A more extensive program of church-sponsored education was inaugurated with the opening of the Iowa Mennonite School in the autumn of 1945 on a nine-acre campus across the road from the Lower Deer Creek Mennonite Church, about eight miles northwest of Kalona. Its three story brick building and its 80 by 140 foot gymnasium auditorium seating 1800 serve a variety of community needs. By commencement time, 1958, a total of 317 young people had been graduated from its four year high school course, with almost fifty per cent going on to college. Paul T. Guengerich, a local man and a minister in the West Union Mennonite Church, with a master's degree from the University of Iowa, has been principal of the school since 1949. The enrollment in 1958-59 was 221 and its teaching staff numbered fourteen.

The most recent institution in the community is the Pleasantview Home for the Aged at Kalona, a 46-room home built and operated by the Mennonite Benevolent Association consisting of thirty-three members representing the Mennonites of the community. The home was built in 1957-58 at an approximate cost of \$250,000 and was opened for service on April 14, 1958. It serves both Mennonites and non-Mennonites. That its popularity has already been established is proved by the long list of applicants waiting to be admitted as guests of the home.

From the Johnson County Mennonite commu-

nity have come a long list of men who were known throughout the church from coast to coast. The first well known leaders were three generations of Swartzendruber Amish ministers, Jacob, his son Frederick, and Frederick's son Jacob F. Swartzendruber. Able men and educated beyond the level of their fellow ministers, they were widely known and influential in Amish circles. Jacob F.'s grandson, A. Lloyd Swartzendruber, is the present leader of the East Union Mennonite Church.

S. D. Guengerich (1837-1929) was one of the most influential laymen ever produced in the Amish church of America. A school teacher-farmer-printer by profession, he was an early leader in the Sunday school movement and in the German school organization. In 1878 he launched the monthly *Christlicher Jugendfreund*, a periodical for Amish youth. Later he was the editor and manager of the Amish *Herold der Wahrheit*. He was largely responsible for creating interest in foreign relief work and missionary enterprises among the Amish and carried on a correspondence with many foreign missionaries which he shared with his readers and friends. For more than fifty years he lived on his Johnson County farm about two miles northwest of the village of Joetown.

Abner G. Yoder, who moved to Johnson County in 1866 from Somerset County, Pennsylvania, was a widely known Amish bishop. His grandson Abner G. Yoder (1879-1942) of Parnell, Iowa,

held important positions in the Mennonite General Conference and was its moderator in 1937-1939. The latter's son, Gideon, is an elder and a professor in Hesston College, a Mennonite school in central Kansas. Dr. Edward Yoder (1893-1945) was at one time a public school teacher in the Johnson County community and later became a professor of Latin in two Mennonite colleges and finally an editor and research scholar in the church's Mennonite Publishing House, Scottdale, Pa.

Perhaps the most widely known son of the community is Dr. Sanford C. Yoder, president-emeritus of Goshen College. Before becoming president of Goshen College in 1923, Yoder was pastor of the East Union Mennonite church near Kalona, and through the years has held many positions of leadership in his denomination. The author of travel books, he is a gifted writer and story-teller.

Dr. Guy F. Hershberger was a public school teacher in Johnson County before becoming a professor of history at Goshen College. Hershberger is executive secretary of two of the church wide committees of Mennonite General Conference. Author of a number of books, his latest production *The Way of the Cross in Human Relations* has received wide recognition beyond Mennonite circles.

Dr. Glen Miller, Professor of Chemistry at Goshen College, grew up in Johnson County and

taught school there before joining the Goshen College staff in 1925. It is doubtful whether any other Mennonite settlement of comparable size in America has produced as many doctors of philosophy as has the Johnson County Amish-Mennonite community. Beginning with S. F. Gingerich, a grandson of Elder Joseph Goldsmith of Lee County, who received his doctor's degree at the University of Michigan in 1909, at least ten additional native sons of the community have won this highest university degree.

MELVIN GINGERICH